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The New York City Department of Education's test-based promotion and retention policy, which identifies and provides support for struggling students, has demonstrated positive effects for student achievement in fifth grade that continue into seventh grade, according to a new RAND Corporation study issued today.

Researchers found that the policy helped students boost their performance on state assessment tests, a critical step toward advancing to the next grade level. The study also found that students retained under the policy didn't suffer negative social or emotional effects as a result of repeating a grade level.

Educators struggle with how best to handle students whose academic performance does not reflect readiness for the next grade by the end of a school year. While retaining these students in grade gives them an additional year to master needed knowledge and skills, critics point out that the practice disproportionately affects low-income and minority children. In addition, retention is associated with low self-esteem, behavioral problems and an increased risk of dropping out of school.

However, promoting students who do not meet academic standards—also known as "social promotion"—puts students at a disadvantage by advancing them to a grade for which they are not prepared.

"The emphasis on early identification of students who are struggling academically and providing those students extra learning opportunities is a critical factor in the success of the New York City Department of Education's promotion and retention policy," said Jennifer McCombs, a co-author of the report and a policy researcher at RAND, a nonpartisan research institution.

The other co-authors were Shella Nataraj Kirby, a RAND senior economist, and Louis T. Mariano, a statistician at RAND.

The RAND study examined the New York City Department of Education's promotion and retention policy, and its impact on student academic and socioemotional outcomes through Spring 2008. The study focused on students who were in fifth grade in 2005, 2006 and 2007. New York City has the largest public school system in the country.

The department implemented the new policy for students in grade 3 in 2003-2004. The policy was extended to grade 5 in 2004-2005, grade 7 in 2005-2006 and grade 8 in 2008-2009. RAND researchers examined the fifth-grade promotion policy at the request of the New York City Department of Education.

Under the policy, general-education students in these grades were required to score at or above performance Level 2 on both the state English language arts and mathematics assessments in order to be promoted to the next grade. Performance at or above Level 3 was considered "proficient" under the No Child Left Behind Act, a higher standard than the promotion benchmark.

Researchers note that the policy emphasized identifying struggling students at the beginning of fifth grade, provided them with services such as additional instructional time and continuously monitored their progress. Struggling students were identified—based on their performance on the fourth grade assessments, teacher recommendations or being previously retained in grade—and scheduled to receive support services in school and outside of school.

Students who did not pass the spring assessments were enrolled in summer school. The policy also offered students multiple opportunities to meet promotion criteria.

"This approach sets New York's policy apart from test-based promotion policies that use test results to make promotion decisions without providing early educational support services to help students improve," Kirby said.

She said that under the promotion policy a significant number of students needed support services, but few were retained. Upon entering the fifth grade, approximately 20 percent of students were categorized as needing assistance. However, by the end of the year, few students were retained under the policy and the percentage of retained students dropped over time, from 3 percent in 2005 to 1 percent in the 2007 (about 600 students out of approximately 58,000 students).

The students who needed additional support services were not evenly distributed across the city's schools, ranging from 0 to 80 percent of a school's fifth-grade class. Researchers found that schools intervened to help as many students as the school was capable of serving. Although schools with highest number of students needing additional services were significantly more likely to have resources—such as reading and math specialists—than those schools with fewer "in-need" students, they were still less likely to be able to serve every student needing services.

Nearly all of the schools provided additional support to students both during the school day and outside of the classroom, including group tutoring. Fewer schools were able to offer one-on-one tutoring during the school day, a practice the study found was associated with improved achievement in mathematics.

Researchers also found that the promotion policy and its support services had positive effects for students that lasted into the seventh grade, the latest grade for which outcome information was available. Those findings include the following:

- Students who needed services at the beginning of fifth grade scored higher on the seventh grade assessments than they would have without the policy.
- Students who were required to attend summer school after fifth grade because of serious academic difficulties scored higher on English language arts and mathematics assessments in the sixth and seventh grades.
- The positive effects of retention on student performance continued into the 7th grade. These effects were larger than those found for early support services alone.
- Effects were generally larger in English language arts than mathematics.

Researchers suggest that New York City continue its policy of identifying early those students who are struggling academically and to continue providing intervention services. They also recommend expanding one-on-one tutoring opportunities.

The RAND report makes other recommendations, including:

- Ensure that academic service providers work consistently with students who need services, instead of being pulled away for other duties such as substitute teaching, lunch duty or proctoring assignments.
- Continue to encourage struggling students to attend summer school.
- Continue to monitor the effects of retention on students as they progress into high school.
- Analyze data on the services being provided to determine the relative cost effectiveness of different support services.

The study, "Ending Social Promotion Without Leaving Children Behind: The Case of New York City," can be found at www.rand.org.

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